TL1087

24 hours in Dili

Report of visit to East Timor, 21-22 May 1989

The opportunity to visit East Timor 'on the side' arose when ACFOA sponsored a visit of development and environmental NGOs to eastern Indonesia for the period 21-28 May.

Two colleagues and I made the visit which was private and separate from the ACFOA program. A longer visit was not possible because of a commitment to join the ACFOA program in West Timor on 22 May.

The purpose of the visit was basically a tourist one: to see Dili (the first time for each of us) and have a day off before the formal visit to Indonesia. The visit was also incidentally a chance to test Indonesia's 1 January decision to access as well as a chance to gain some first hand impressions and, hopefully, to meet some local people. Though tourists, we were, I think, the first members of Australian NGOs to visit East Timor in the 14 years since the Indonesian invasion of 1975.

Flight reservations to Dili were made about 2 weeks in advance by a Melbourne travel agent through Garuda. Our intentions and schedule were also known to the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, government officials in the Indonesian Cabinet Secretariat, AIDAB in Canberra and to some Indonesian NGOs.

No one, however, appeared to take much notice of us as we queued at the Dili counter in the domestic terminal in Denpasar on 21 May.

We were the only Europeans on our nearly full Garuda flight. The other passengers were, as far as I could tell, predominantly Indonesian. One, who seemed to be a courier, wore a military uniform. On arrival in Dili he collected a large, officially sealed, red suit case marked 'State Documents'.

We were impressed by the wide, but largely dry, river courses and the closely packed, precipitous mountains visible below us on the brief flight from Kupang to East Timor. Dili, bordered by blue sea and beaches on the left and mountain foothills on the right as we approached, looked very pretty compared to Kupang whose natural setting is rather barren and featureless.

After landing as the new airport some 15 minutes to the west of Dili, we presented ourselves at a table just inside the terminal door bearing a sign 'Foreign Vistors Documentation' and staffed by three Timorese. Watched by the other passengers and a small crowd of impassive Timorese pressed against the wall outside, we gave the senior official our names, occupations ('executive directors'), flight details, purpose of visit ('pleasure'), passport numbers, and place of accommodation ('Hotel Turismo') in Dili. Everything was dutifully taken down in triplicate and we wondered who would see the various copies. The procedure was unusual. We were being treated as if we were in a foreign country though we had arrived on a domestic flight. Nevertheless this was the only moment during our visit when any overt official interest was taken in us, and it was perfunctory at that.

The senior official insisted that the New Resende Inn (the only accommodation advertised in the terminal) was the only place to stay and offered to organise a taxi. We politely declined and took a cab to the Hotel Turismo instead.

The sealed road into town led past a large coloured sign bidding us, in Indonesian, welcome to Dili, then over the one way bridge across the Comoro river (its wide waterless bed being mined for sand and stones by small groups of people, presumably for construction materials), past the old airport (now an Indonesian army helicopter base with six TNI choppers to be seen), and along the foreshore road to the Turismo.

The Turismo (a Dili landmark well known to all Timor watchers) has recently changed hands. The new manager is said to be a Chinese from Surabaya who has reneged on some of the payment and has been taken to court by the former owner, now a resident of Darwin. The staff were, however, predominantly Timorese and though most pleasant did not pay us much attention particularly as we arrived into the 11th round of a US heavyweight fight telecast on colour TVRI which had the undivided attention of the staff and 10 or so young Timorese males who occupied most of the small lobby where reception was located.

Passport numbers, names (carefully written down by the receptionist as 'Mr W. Pat' etc.), home address (smudged), occupation etc. were once again all taken down in triplicate. Rooms were allocated in the left wing (sic), the right wing being far too expensive, and after a wash we had a light lunch of nasi goreng in the pleasant garden of the Turismo courtyard within earshot of the gentle surf.

Several vendors discovered us. A teenage boy offered to sell Timorese cloth, another mandarins - graded and gracefully suspended in strings from a carrying stick. As a memento of the visit, I purchased a beautiful length of black cloth, hand made in Atsabe and threaded through with yellow and blue. I paid more than I might have and tried to explain in Indonesian why but I don't think he understood.

Enquiries revealed that, as it was Sunday, Mass would be celebrated at 4.00 pm at the Motael church, whose parish priest is Fr Ricardo, Bishop Belo's Vicar-General or second-in-charge. As the Motael church was visible on the foreshore across the other side of the bay, we decided to walk and say hello to anyone along the way.

Small groups of children were playing in the shallow water, floating on car tubes, splashing about. Others were digging for worms in the gravelly sand. In broken English they asked us where we came from. We told them, took photos and chatted a little in Indonesian, our only common language.

Further along, shaded by one of the huge banyan trees which line the waterfront, some fishing people from Baucau were mending nets on the grass outside a tin humpy. Back along the street, Indonesian soldiers grouped at the gate of their military compound watching us pass. Apart from the stationary helicopters we saw on our way in to town from the airport, these soldiers were the only evidence of a military presence we saw that day. To all outward appearances Dili could have been a sleepy backwater where nothing much ever happened.

We arrived at the church at 3.50 expecting to be able to get a seat inside. Instead pre-Mass devotions were already in full swing and the congregation overflowed into the front yard. Mass followed, the fourth that day in that church, one of several in Dili.

It was attended by some 800 people, all Timorese to my eye, and had to be held outside. Hymns, prayers, readings and sermon were all in Tetum and conducted with slow solemnity and discipline, the many small children included. Regrettably I had no access to content but if the medium is the message the serious demeanour and obvious effort to present in their simple Sunday best spoke volumes about the importance of the Church to these crowds of East Timorese.

After Mass we asked Fr Ricardo is Bishop Belo was in Dili and whether we might call on him. He advised us to try our luck immediately as he understood the Bishop's schedule was busy. So on the way back to the Turismo I called at the Bishop's house which is close by the Hotel. The Bishop, who clearly did not wish to be disturbed, grudgingly agreed to see us the following morning.

That evening, to experience more of Dili in the limited time available, we decided to eat outside the Turismo. To our surprise, however, we learnt there are no Timorese restaurants and we ended up eating 'masakan Padang' in Dili...

As we were leaving the hotel to eat we were introduced to Vic Russell, a portly Australian who was visiting Dili for the weekend with his private secretary, a young Eurasian woman from Kupang. Vic explained he owned a mine in Western Australia and had mining and tourist interests in West Timor. He was obviously taking advantage of the opening up to check out East Timor's tourist potential, mindful that East Timor under Portugal was a popular tourist destination for Australians and that both the tourists and the Indonesian government were looking for new locations to meet the overflow from Bali. West Timor has only recently been opened to tourism and East Timorese are already being trained in tourism in Bali. Vic expressed considerable satisfaction with what he had seen of the highly scenic coast east of Dili that afternoon thanks to Senor Arsenio Horta who had acted as his tour guide. We were introduced to Senor Arsenio who explained he had the franchise on the Tourismo bar and kitchen.

Senor Horta offered to show us around the next morning and provide us with a special dish of stuffed squid from the Tourismo kitchen. We declined. He mentioned he had visited Australia, then left. Vic explained that the Senor's brother was the Fretilin representative at the UN but he could not recall his name, except that it was long.

Later that night Vic confided that if we were to go out of Dili the next day we should have someone from 'the Fretilin' with us because things were still hot in the interior. Seventy Indonesian troops had been killed some weeks ago and a further ten or so more recently.

Early Monday morning we called at the Garuda office to confirm our flight out. This Central Business District area of Dili, characterised by large shops, government offices and small parks, was remarkably clean but also remarkably empty of people. Whether this was the norm or a function of Monday mornings for some reason, I do not know but I was surprised as several reports have referred to Dili as 'bustling'.

Some 200 people, including students from an SMA across the road and a few military, were watching a volley ball match in the park behind the government offices. Well turned out teams from the Departments of Statistics (Bulog) and Health were competing. I chatted in Indonesian with the students about school and was shown an Indonesian physics text.

A taxi took us to the new cathedral, a cavernous white building that dominates the Dili landscape. Asked how could the people afford such a building, Fr Brito, the Goanese parish priest, a tall man with white hair and a white cassock, told us without embarassment that the government had subsidised the construction and President Suharto had opened it last November. I have heard since that the people boycott this church. A military helicopter, barely discernible against the dark green of the hills, flew over as we came out of the church. Across the road there is a small Protestant church.

Driving along the foreshore I photographed a navy barge unloading unidentifiable materials onto the wharf behind a high grill fence. Flanking the barge were two landing craft.

A little further along an unnerving scene presented itself. In broad daylight on one of Dili's main streets, some 15-20 Indonesian soldiers from the compound we had passed the previous afternoon, were beating up one of their colleagues. Stripped to his green pants and suspended by soldiers holding his wrists and feet, the victim struggled as soldiers in heavy boots kicked his unprotected body. Clearly shaken, our Timorese driver suggested in Indonesian that he may be a thief. People stood watching from a distance up and down the street.

Further along police were loading a motor cycle onto a utility.

To gain an overview, we asked to be taken to the hills behind Dili. The road took us past Comarca prison, its high thick walls set back off the road and partly obscured by trees and vegetable gardens.

This area was also the other Dili, as distinct from the CBD near the water, where Becora market is situated and many of the people live. As we drove a group of sweating Indonesian soldiers, stripped to the waste and holding guns, jogged down the centre of the road. The choice of venue for this drill - in the middle of 'residential' Dili, was hardly accidental.

Further along we passed what used to be the Portuguese Governor's residence but is now the 'Istana Negara', Indonesia's state guest house in Dili. Soldiers and military vehicles stood in the yard. Higher up, simple frail shacks sat on the steep hillside like items on a shelf.

Overlooking Dili, its new green 'Provincial Parliament' clearly visible centre stage below, we saw several green trucks emerge from the town and start up the road in our direction. Several minutes later, six army trucks roared past us, full of food and armed soldiers (we estimated 200-250 troops in all). The taxi driver said they were going to Maubisse. Asked 'what for?' he replied, 'because there are people there who are not happy'.

Heading back down the road we came across the jogging army unit still in the middle of the road. People stepped to the side of the road to let them go by.

Our cab detoured into the new Becora market (called, in Indonesian, Pasar Becora Kecamatan Dili Timor, on its main building). A line of familiar Indonesian style food carts stood along the front. A blue mini bus marked 'Dili-Manatuto-Laclubar-return' was preparing to depart.

Inside,the market seemed well stocked. Kitchen detergents, whisky, children's shoes, dried fish, fresh meat, live chickens, fresh fruit and a variety of vegetables, to name some items, were available in varying quantities. The labels indicated that the packaged and manufactured goods were imported, mostly from Java. However business was slow due to a surprising absence of consumers. Why, I could not ascertain, but it left numerous vendors with nothing to do but play cards. One woman vendor volunteered she was from Sulawesi.

A brief conversation with Bishop Belo followed at his large residence next to the ICRC base in Dili. He made the following points:

1. he confirmed he had written the UN referendum letter saying that it was the view of the people, and that though he did not necessarily expect it would change the situation, sometimes actions of this kind had to be taken even it if caused harm to the church. He had no objection to the letter being publicised.
2. he expressed interest in international development NGOs visiting East Timor to assess the situation and possibly working there. He would need written proposals. While acknowledging total NGO independence was important he doubted that NGOs would be able to visit or work completely independent of the government.
3. there are an average of 30 Indonesian soldiers stationed in every village in East Timor.
4. Fr Joao de Deus (Baucau) and Fr Locatelli (Fatumaca) were not currently being harassed. However he believed they were persona non grata with the military who would like them removed from East Timor.

Our luggage was X-rayed as we left but not otherwise examined. However each of us was taken aside into a closed room and checked over with a metal detector. As this routine is normally done in public, its conduct in private on this occasion was somewhat unsettling.

A group of smartly dressed Indonesian women from the Dharma Wanita (Government Womens) organisation arrived on the plane that was to take us out. People standing around told us they had come to present a gift to the women of East Timor from Madam Suharto. The gifts were to be seen outside: shiny gold trophies in glass boxes mounted on the back of 4-wheel drives and guarded by two men apiece in white karate garb.

After photographs with Governor Carrascalao, who flew out on our plane with his daughter (occupying seats 1 and 2 up the front), and much two-way radioing, the women's delegation and their police escort drove off to Dili.

A separate vehicle collected an Indonesian pop star, a fleshy Elvis look alike dressed all in white with a high collar, who had arrived on the same flight as the First Lady's representatives but failed to score a lift to town with them.

Flying west to Kupang we were struck by the highly organised pattern of a number of the villages below. Instead of the traditional informal scatter of huts, the houses in these villages were neatly arranged opposite each other in straight lines either side of a road. We surmised they were resettlement sites.

In Kupang we met some officials from the Australian embassy in Jakarta. After visiting development projects in West Timor they intended going overland by four-wheel drive to East Timor. Their group included officers from the Australian Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB) which raised the question as to whether AIDAB is planning to extend its aid involvement in Timor to East Timor in cooperation with the Indonesian Government. If so, this would represent a significant further consolidation of Australia's recognition of the incorporation.

Reflecting on the visit and discussing it with Indonesian NGOs, two conclusions forced themselves on us. First, if one did not know what questions to ask and who to ask them of, and if one could not quickly establish trust with informants, it would be tragically easy to learn nothing and draw false conclusions.

Second, it would also be tragically simple to visit Dili (which is not East Timor) on a Sunday, stay in a hotel in the business district (and therefore be physically and socially removed from the people), see nothing out of the ordinary and conclude that everything is normal.

After all , all we saw that afternoon and evening were Timorese watching TV, Timorese playing on the beach and praying at Church, and Timorese wandering around the streets. The only signs of the military were a cluster of idle helicopters and some soldiers in a gateway. And what is to stop the authorities duplicating this type of scenario on any other day of the week, especially if VIPs and journalists were formally visiting?

The other, ugly, side of life in Dili only came into focus the following morning. In the brief space of a couple of hours, without particularly looking for it, we gained a concentrated glimpse into the military situation. For this glimpse it was clear to us that despite the improved access, the situation even in Dili was still far from normal and the 'East Timor question" was still that, a question mark.

Pat Walsh